

CELEBRATING A CENTURY OF CONSERVATION: *The National Wildlife Refuge System*

*Mark Chase
Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District*

On March 14, 2003, the National Wildlife Refuge System will be 100 years old. Over the past three months, a monthly column has appeared on these pages with facts and figures about the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Wildlife Refuge System. This is the fourth column in a five-part series about the National Wildlife Refuge System. Following the five-part series, a quiz will be published about the Refuge System whose answers will have been provided in the monthly columns. On March 14, 2003, at the Holiday Inn, Detroit Lakes, we will host a public celebration commemorating 100 years of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Completed quizzes that are brought to the March 14 celebration will be put in a bin and a drawing conducted. The first quiz drawn that has all of the correct answers will receive a very special prize. Joe Hautman, two-time Federal Duck Stamp contest winner, has donated a signed and numbered print of his winning 2002-2003 duck stamp and will be present in Detroit Lakes on March 14 to remark the print and present it to the winner. Watch these pages for each month's article and save them on the refrigerator to assist you come quiz time! The final article in the series and the quiz will appear in a February edition of the *Tribune*.

DETROIT LAKES WMD: Your Duck Stamp Dollars at Work

The Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District, like Tamarac and Hamden Slough, is a unit of the National Wildlife Refuge System. Unlike most traditional national wildlife refuges that are a single, relatively large block of habitat on the landscape, a wetland management district (WMD) is an assemblage of many small units known as Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). In our case, the WPAs in Becker, Clay, Mahnomon, Norman, and Polk Counties make up the Detroit Lakes Wetland Management District. In addition to the WPAs, which are public lands managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, WMDs also administer easement programs that protect both wetland and upland habitats on private land that are important for waterfowl production and other wildlife. Within the five-county Detroit Lakes District, we manage more than 160 WPAs and over 300 easements.

Waterfowl Production Areas are purchased from willing sellers, with revenue generated from the sale of Migratory Bird Hunting stamps or "Duck Stamps." Each year, an extremely competitive contest is sponsored by the Fish and Wildlife Service to select the winning artwork that will grace the Duck Stamp. The first duck stamp was issued in 1934, and in its 70-year history, artists born, raised, or living in Minnesota have won the contest nearly one third of the time, including wins in seven of the past 14 years by the Hautman brothers Joe, Bob, and Jim. With the printing of the 69th duck stamp, featuring Joe Hautman's Black Scoters, every species of North American waterfowl has been honored on the stamp. Even the Nene (pronounced "nay-nay"), an endangered goose indigenous to Hawaii, has been represented on the stamp, taking the top honor in 1965. A Black Lab (holding a mallard) was featured on the 1960 stamp, and a decoy, that of a canvasback, appeared on the 1976 stamp. Since 1958, when Congress authorized the use of duck stamp revenues to purchase small wetlands, nearly 3,000 WPAs

protecting more than 668,000 wetland habitat acres, have been established, most within the prairie pothole region of the Dakotas, Minnesota, Iowa, and Montana.

Once a waterfowl production area is purchased, management actions begin to restore wetlands that may have been drained, and reseed native plant species into the upland area. The connection of the wetlands to waterfowl production seems obvious, but what is less obvious is the critical need for high-quality upland nesting habitat surrounding the wetland complexes. While certain highly visible species like the mallard duck nest in a variety of habitats and often in some seemingly very strange places, most species of waterfowl have more specific habitat type requirements for nesting. Blue-winged teal are a common nesting species in our area and require open grassland/prairie habitats to maximize their chances of successfully hatching a nest and raising a brood.

In order to provide the highest quality habitat for nesting waterfowl, the District's land acquisition efforts are focused in the "prairie pothole" region of the five-county area. This is the area between the Red River Valley floor and Glacial Lake Agassiz beach ridges on the west and the forested portion of the District on the east. The prairie potholes were formed by the action of glaciation. As the glaciers retreated north, the undulating land dotted with wetlands appeared. Grazing by the large ungulates, primarily the bison herds, and fires, many set by the native people of the region, maintained the prairie aspect of the pothole region. The prairie potholes of Minnesota, the Dakotas, and eastern Montana are critically important to the North American waterfowl populations and have undergone dramatic changes since the time of European settlement. While 668,000 acres seems like a great deal of habitat, for perspective keep in mind that more than 50 times that acreage in this country is enrolled in CRP.

Once wetlands are restored and upland species are seeded, intensive management is necessary to maintain the reestablished prairie grasslands. Without the periodic burning of these open areas, tree and shrub species will quickly take over, and the value of the open habitats for species depending on them will be lost. While trees make fine wildlife habitat for many species of wildlife, other species like the blue-winged teal, prairie chickens, and many species of songbirds must have large tracts of open prairie grassland in order to thrive as a species. Many songbird populations have undergone precipitous declines over the past forty years due to loss of open grasslands. The District strives to maintain open, treeless habitat in those portions of the District where soils data indicates historic prairie habitats occurred. This is accomplished through prescribed burning and in some instances, mechanical removal of trees.

As stated previously, WPAs are public land, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Waterfowl Production Areas are open to hunting, fishing, trapping, bird watching, and photography, among other uses, for your recreation and enjoyment. Waterfowl Production Areas are conspicuously posted with green and white signs featuring a canvasback hen and her brood. Within the Detroit Lakes District, WPAs range in size from the eight-acre "Tiny" WPA to the more than 2000-acre Nelson Prairie WPA, both located in Mahanomen County. Not surprisingly, the vast majority of visitors to WPAs in our area are hunters. During the fall months, waterfowl and deer hunters take to the WPAs for a walk in the grass and a chance to put something on the table. While the hunting seasons have once again come and gone, the decoys are put away and the guns are in the safe, WPAs are still a fine place to visit, even in the grips of winter. A pair of cross-country skis, snowshoes, or for this year especially, just a pair of warm boots will get you around to enjoy some of the finest days of the year. Take the kids and walk the frozen wetlands. Many species of wildlife remain active through the winter and their

stories can be read in their tracks left behind. This year, that's one activity you can still enjoy with only a skiff of snow!

Remember, next month's column will include the quiz, so save this article. For those of you who forgot where you put the previous three, the articles will be posted on our website to help you with the quiz. Go to <http://midwest.fws.gov> click on Minnesota on the map and again on Detroit Lakes WMD.

For more information on the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Refuge System Centennial, or the your National Wildlife Refuge System please visit our website at <http://www.fws.gov>.